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The open method of coordination and lifelong guidance

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Peter Plant and Roger Kjærgård



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Key words: lifelong guidance, career guidance, career management skills, comparison, coordination, guidance policies, open method of coordination, governance



Abstract

This article displays the importance of career guidance in Europe and beyond. Peter Plant and Roger Kjærgård provide insight into the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), where mutual peer learning and development is of high importance. This paper highlights some of the elements of OMC in career guidance, discussing the terms “benchmarking”, “peer learning” and “qualitative goals”. Evidently, the OMC is seen as an instrument of governance, albeit a “soft” one in relation to career guidance. The article points out the advantages of this soft steering model, e.g. mutual peer learning. However, it also talks about the criticism this particular approach earns, as being just another tool for policy convergence in areas that are outside democratic political control. The authors further discuss the focus of OMC to develop common frameworks for quality assurance across Europe. These frameworks put perspective on career management skills in developing quality assurance approaches and on establishing national career guidance coordination. Policies and practices, however, aren’t interchangeable across national borders to create convergence, as structures, policies, resources, and cultures differ. There is plenty to be learnt from each other, and plenty of silos to be broken down. Practically, the vehicle for applying the OMC approach has been the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN). (Ed.)

The Open Method of Coordination and Lifelong Guidance

Peter Plant and Roger Kjærgård

The European Council of Ministers of Education, first in 2004, and again in 2008 (see Council of the European Union 2004 u. 2008), have adopted EU Council Resolutions on Lifelong Guidance with the aim to better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. The links between lifelong learning and lifelong guidance are clear, they have been for decades. Resolutions, however, are guidelines, not directives.

Other forms of mechanisms for creating convergence are utilised as a policy-making tool. Thus, in the most recent Resolution (see *ibid*), EU member states were encouraged to give special attention to four key areas in lifelong guidance, namely:

- a) Lifelong acquisition of career management skills
- b) Facilitation of access by all citizens to guidance services
- c) Quality assurance in guidance provision and
- d) Coordination and cooperation among various national, regional and local stakeholders.

This puts an emphasis on quality assurance and cooperation, along with career management skills and access. This article will discuss some OMC (Open Method of Coordination), “soft-policy” instrument, perspectives linked to these issues.

Definition

First, a definition of career guidance adopted by the OECD and the EU: “*Career guidance refers to services intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational,*

training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. These may include services in schools, in universities and colleges, in training institutions, in public employment services, in companies, in the voluntary/community sector and in the private sector” (OECD 2004a, p. 10).

This is a broad definition and it encompasses a number of activities, often conducted in formal settings, such as schools or public employment services (PES), social media, games, role plays, work experience programmes and other activity-based approaches that are an increasing part of these efforts. In short, guidance is much more than a face-to-face interview. It includes (see Ford 2001): informing, advising, assessing, teaching, enabling, advocating, networking, feeding back, managing, innovation/system change, signposting, mentoring, sampling work experience or learning tasters, following up. This list points out the many roles and functions of career guidance, many of which go far beyond direct client work, and well into feedback and system change: no single guidance practitioner can fulfil all these roles. Clearly, there is much to learn from each other, on a professional and a cultural level, as the Open Method of

Coordination implies. Nevertheless, perhaps this approach also has some unintended side effects, as discussed below.

Government, governance and the open method of coordination

Obviously, career guidance is high on the political agenda. The EU, the OECD, and the World Bank, along with national authorities and stakeholders are involved in policy-making in terms of career guidance. A process of governmentalisation has taken place (see Burchell/Gordon/Miller 1991), i.e. that the role of the state has moved from direct regulation and discipline, to involving a multitude of stakeholders to create the basis for well informed and conscious career choices (see Kjærgård 2012). Michel Foucault argues that this new governmental rationality represents not so much the dominant position by an all-pervasive state, but rather the governmentalisation of state and of society (see Shore 2011). The EU is one such force which plays a major role in policy areas such as social protection, social inclusion, education, youth and training, and career guidance — areas into which the EU has introduced the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for “Europeanising” these policy agendas. As a mode of governing complex societies, the OMC does not seek to centralise or impose hierarchy over these domains; instead it emphasises governance based on coordination, peer review, networks and heterarchy (see Haahr 2005). The OMC is regarded as a “soft-policy” instrument, based on the voluntary cooperation of its member states. The method, which has been applied since 2000, uses a series of jointly agreed tools: objectives, guidelines, indicators, benchmarks and good practices in order to improve policies at national and regional levels. The OMC places strong emphasis on the involvement of relevant stakeholders, including local and regional actors. A definition of the OMC has been provided by the EU Commission: *“The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) [...] is a method of soft governance which aims to spread best practice and achieve convergence towards EU goals in those policy areas which fall under the partial or full competence of Member States. Since binding EU rules cannot be used as the means to achieve convergence*

among Member States in such cases, OMC relies on other mechanisms. These mechanisms involve establishing guidelines, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks, and national and regional targets, backed by periodic evaluations and peer reviews” (Prpic 2014, p. 1).

Evidently, the OMC is seen as an instrument of governance, albeit a “soft” one, as discussed by Roger Kjærgård (2012) in relation to the genealogy of career guidance. Practically in recent years, the vehicle for applying the OMC approach in the guidance area has been the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN), in which all the Nordic countries have played a highly active role (see e.g. ELGPN 2015a). The OMC approach, in itself, may seem uncontroversial, but the OMC has in fact been criticised for being just another tool for pushing policy convergence in areas which are outside democratic political control, in this case to make guidance more manageable from a governmental point of view (see Bengtsson 2015), and linked to wider European lifelong educational policies (see Cort 2011) of which career guidance is perceived as a lever.

With this backdrop, this is how the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) presented itself as a major development in terms of lifelong guidance: *“The ELGPN represented a major development in support of national lifelong guidance policy development in Europe. As a Member-State-driven network, it also represented an innovative form of the Open Method of Co-ordination within the EU [...]. Through appropriate liaison arrangements, the network ensured regular contact with other relevant bodies and networks at national, European and international levels”* (ELGPN n.d., n.pag.)

The ELGPN has had the most significant impact in guidance through the OMC in areas which are not linked with present national structures, and which do not affect present governmental silos, explicitly such areas as e.g. quality assurance approaches, the introduction of career management skills as a framework for guidance policies, and in terms of establishing national coordination units, known as national fora of career guidance. Some of these issues will be dealt with below.

Comparisons

The components (benchmarking, peer learning, qualitative goals) of the OMC process point to mutual learning, which in turn calls for comparative studies as a basis for mutual understanding. Thus, the following sections are based mainly on a comparative overview on career guidance structures, methods, and policies by Anthony G. Watts and Ronald G. Sultana (2004). Guidance services reflect the economic, political, social, cultural, educational and labour market contexts — as well as the professional and organisational and linguistic structures — in which they operate. The Open Method of Coordination is seldom able to overcome such basic structural differences. Below, the following broad headings will expand these issues: rationale, evidence, and delivery:

Rationale

Career guidance is a public as well as a private good. The policy goals in relation to career guidance are threefold:

- Learning goals, i.e. improving the efficiency of the education and training system and managing its interface with the labour market.
- Labour market goals, including improving the match between supply and demand and managing adjustments to change.
- Social equity goals, including supporting equal opportunities and promoting social inclusion.

The balance between and within these categories varies across countries, and it is a challenge to find a balance between them in the provision of services. The result is that countries increasingly recognise the need to expand access to career guidance so that it is available, not just to selected groups like school-leavers or unemployed, but to everyone throughout their lives. This is what the EU policy aims at and the OMC favours this approach. However, in some countries, for example Denmark, present guidance policies aim at reducing the number of clients to e.g. 20% of a year group, leaving the 80% to fend for themselves on the basis of a debatable screening process with the focus of educational readiness, known as *uddannelsesparathedsvurdering*. This procedure may add to the range of complex

problems of those who seek or rather are obliged to take part in guidance: they have been selected as problematic (see Plant 2013 and 2015). The political aim of targeting and limiting services to particular groups may have the counter effect of stigmatising the very people who need career guidance services the most, placing career guidance in a social control role (see Plant/Thomsen 2012). This is the dark and often overlooked side of narrowly focused guidance policies (see Plant/Valgreen 2014).

In practice, the focal points of guidance efforts in many cases are young people “Not in Education, Employment or Training” (NEET), issues of educational retention and guidance in relation to unemployed adults. Unfortunately, guidance activities are mostly remedial and there is little emphasis on preventive guidance, even though career guidance is perceived as an important tool to combat, e.g. Early School Leaving (see Haug/Plant 2015a). A recent EU report, however, introduces three approaches to guidance (see Oomen/Plant 2014): (1) Prevention, (2) Intervention, and (3) Compensation. In doing so, this report also points out the importance of de-individualising the problems of early school leaving by introducing the concept of push out, rather than the educational drop out. With this backdrop, Erik H. Haug and Peter Plant (2015a) suggest that greater emphasis should be placed on Prevention and Intervention. There is a move towards self-help approaches, including approaches designed to help individuals to develop the skills of managing their own careers. This move is reflected in the OMC approach to developing career guidance. Therefore, career management skills (CMS; see below) are a growing in focus of career guidance policies and practices.

Evidence and Quality

Empirical evidence on outcomes from career guidance is pivotal to policy making. Again, OMC, the Open Method of Coordination comes into play here, as the ELGPN has produced reports on this issue (see e.g. Hooley 2014). Evidence exists at three points:

- *Immediate* learning outcomes from career guidance, including attitudinal changes and increased knowledge.

- *Intermediate* behavioural changes, including entry into a career path, course or job.
- *Longer-term* outcomes, such as success and satisfaction.

In these terms, there is substantial evidence of the learning outcomes which individuals derive from career guidance interventions. Learning outcomes are generally not seen as hard evidence of guidance effects (see Plant 2001 and 2004). The whole dispute on evidence in career guidance reveals some of the difficulties in establishing “hard facts”, in particular, in relation to the economic outcomes of guidance activities. This debate reaches back over the decades (see e.g. Hooley/Dodd 2015; Hughes 2011; Watts 1999; Killeen/White/Watts 1992). Evidence-based public policy is informed by rigorously established objective evidence such as randomised controlled trials to identify programs and practices capable of improving policy relevant outcomes. The evidence-based approach thus represents a particular, positivistic scientific view on policy making. Ideally, projects and trials are evaluated; and subsequently, policies are put in place. To identify what counts as evidence, Louise Shaxson (2005) identifies five components of evidence robustness: credibility, generalisability, reliability, objectivity and authenticity.

Evidence in guidance is not produced in a societal vacuum where answers are simple and straightforward. On the contrary, the career guidance field is filled with complex problem areas, known as wild or wicked problems to which there are no simplistic solutions (see Haug/Plant 2015b). For example, evidence as seen from the individual user’s perspective may well lie in areas of client satisfaction; the organisational interest will often focus on the smooth operation of the guidance service, with a high level of professional competences and with adequate resources; the policy-makers, both on a national, regional and local level, will look towards evidence of fulfilling overall policy goals in terms of employment, economic development, and suchlike. The notion of evidence as a basis for policy-making stems from the medical area, but such practices cannot be transferred to other areas uncomplicatedly. In short, evidence is by no means a neutral zone: it is an area of intense intellectual and political struggle (see Krogstrup 2011).

Linked to the issue of creating more robust evidence, the Open Method of Coordination has included efforts to develop common frameworks for quality assurance across Europe (see Plant 2001 and 2004). Quality is measured for a number of (related) reasons (see Watt 1998):

- Political reasons: to justify the service
- Funding purposes: to show that the service is worthwhile
- Measure client progress: to assess implementation of planned objectives
- Record what is happening: monitoring
- Strategic planning: organisational development
- Practice & policy development: assessing good practice; benchmarking.

One or all may be embedded in specific quality assurance procedures. It seems fair to observe that a number of assumptions about the benefits and quality of guidance are in operation (the reduction of labour market failures and educational drop-outs, etc.), and some studies have dealt explicitly with the economic aspects of guidance however, more have dealt with customer satisfaction surveys. In short, without being directly price-tagged, guidance may serve as a societal lubricant in easing the frictions in the labour market, in the educational system, and between the two. In a few cases, such economic aspects are now being supplemented by alternative quality approaches, including ethical, knowledge-based, and sustainability-oriented methods (see Plant 2001 and 2014), none of which have been taken up by the OMC, which typically deals with mainstream approaches.

Delivery

No country has yet developed an adequate lifelong guidance system; the Open Method of Coordination has not created the perfect system, so far. On the contrary, many guidance services reflect the silo structures of national or regional governments, with little or no cross-sectoral cooperation. All countries, however, have examples of good practice. While emphasising that good quality career information is essential for good quality career guidance, linking educational and occupational information, Anthony G. Watts and Ronald G. Sultana (2004) note a number of points relating to delivery:

- 1.) A growing recognition of the importance of career education and guidance in schools.
- 2.) A risk of career education and guidance being marginalised in schools.
- 3.) Some career guidance available in a specialist form based outside the school.
- 4.) A growing concern for young people at risk who have dropped out of education and training.
- 5.) Guidance services in tertiary education are inadequate or nonexistent in most countries.
- 6.) A need to integrate public employment services (PES) more closely into lifelong guidance.
- 7.) Career guidance in the workplace is growing, including career planning workshops.
- 8.) Career guidance in adult education needs more attention.
- 9.) Current guidance provision is particularly inadequate in the third age.

Silos and coordination

As revealed under the nine points (section above), there is a need for cutting across government silos and division lines, of which there are plenty. Thus, a cross-sectoral approach has been adopted in some countries. This is in fact one of the results of the OMC approach in the sense that mutual learning and benchmarking has taken place on this particular point (see CEDEFOP 2008). The need for national and regional coordination of guidance efforts is evident to avoid overlapping and duplication. Norway, for example, with its regional partnerships, shows such an attempt to bring a number of stakeholders in guidance together: schools, PES, local authorities, trade unions, and guidance centres (see e.g. VOX 2015). Many countries have established national coordination bodies, such as a National Council on Career Guidance (England), a National Forum on Career Guidance (Ireland, Germany, Norway), or a Forum of Debate on Career Guidance (Denmark), just to mention a few. Most of these are rather weak structures in the sense that they have no executive powers. They may provide some strategic leadership though e.g. creating national career guidance strategies, but the political power to steer guidance in particular policy directions sits strongly in the government silos. National councils or fora in this area tend to come and go, according to the

political climate at the time. This points out the limits of the OMC approach.

Career Management Skills (CMS)

The development of Career Management Skills across Europe has been an important area for the Open Method of Coordination. Again the ELGPN has played an important role here (see e.g. Gravina/ Lovsin 2012; ELGPN 2015b). Definitions of CMS vary across EU member states (see Sultana 2011). CMS is Anglo-Saxon in origin: “acquisition de la capacité de s’orienter” is the French equivalent. Some countries consider CMS within broader forms of “career education” and “career development learning”. Some restrict its meaning to “career planning”, or “transition skills”.

In spite of difficulties that some countries, in particular perhaps the Nordic countries experience with the term “CMS” (see Thomsen 2014; Haug 2014), most fall within the DOTS framework (see Law/ Watts 1977; Law 1999) i.e. they involve learning competences that support Decision-learning, Opportunity awareness, Transition learning, and Self-awareness. Tristram Hooley et al. (2013), and in particular Ronald G. Sultana (2011), however, warn against uncritical import of the concept of CMS and its Blueprints-inspired practices “*The notion of a ‘Blueprint’ [...] gives the unfortunate impression that there is ‘one best way’ of doing things [...] and that policies and practices can be lent and borrowed unproblematically. [...] [N]othing could be further from the truth*” (Sultana 2001, p. 18). This position questions the whole idea of the Open Method of Coordination, if carried out uncritically. Moreover, it may be seen as a highly individualistic approach, which may be unfamiliar to some cultures. CMS seems to presuppose that everybody would view themselves as having a career: this may indeed not be the case.

Conclusions

In Europe, career guidance is high on the public policy agenda. Yet, there is no Pan-European plan for developing guidance services. EU think tanks such as the European Lifelong Guidance Policy

Network (ELGPN) have taken the longer route to inspire national developments in a cross-country learning model, known in the EU as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). This method has its advantages, as it is a soft steering model, and it forms the basis for mutual peer learning. On the other hand, this particular approach is criticised as being just another tool for policy convergence in areas which are outside democratic political control. Cecilia Shore (2011) points out the fact that the OMC is an exemplary case of multi-level governance and “governance without government”. OMC is not a traditional hierarchical top down model of control, but rather a more diffuse set of techniques of disciplinary power in which lines of authority are more obscure and where binding norms are achieved through non-enforceable peer evaluation and voluntary self regulation. OMC can be seen as a new type of neoliberal government (see Burchell/Gordon/Miller 1991). The EU Commission itself asserts that the OMC is a method of soft governance which aims to “spread

best practice and achieve convergence” towards EU goals in those policy areas which fall under the partial or full competence of member states. Since binding EU rules cannot be used as the means to achieve convergence among member states in such cases, OMC relies on other mechanisms. So far, the focus has been on frameworks for career management skills; on developing quality assurance approaches; and on establishing national career guidance coordination fora, i.e. largely unalarming issues. Policies and practices, however, cannot be lent and borrowed unproblematically across national borders to create convergence, as structures, policies, resources, and cultures differ. Convergence or “truths” may not in fact be the answer: fruitful differences can provide the fertile ground for future developments in the guidance field. By down-playing the convergence aspects of the OMC, the mutual *peer-learning* aspects, by contrast, could come to the forefront. There is plenty to be learnt from each other, and plenty of silos to be broken down.

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Foto: Kristin B. Kjærgård

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Die Offene Methode der Koordinierung und Lifelong Guidance

Kurzzusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag zeigt die Bedeutung der Bildungs- und Berufsberatung innerhalb und außerhalb Europas auf. Peter Plant und Roger Kjærgård gewähren Einblick in die Offene Methode der Koordinierung (OMK), bei der das gegenseitige Lernen von KollegInnen (Peer Learning) und ihre Entwicklung einen hohen Stellenwert einnehmen. Im Beitrag werden einige Elemente der OMK in Hinblick auf die Bildungs- und Berufsberatung beleuchtet und näher auf die Begriffe „Benchmarking“, „Peer Learning“ und „qualitative Ziele“ eingegangen. Die OMK gilt offensichtlich als Steuerungsinstrument – wenn auch als ein „sanftes“ in Zusammenhang mit der Bildungs- und Berufsberatung. Der Beitrag zeigt die Vorteile dieses sanften Steuerungsinstruments auf, wie z.B. das gegenseitige Peer Learning, beschäftigt sich jedoch auch mit der Kritik an diesem besonderen Ansatz: So handle es sich nur um ein weiteres Instrument der Konvergenzpolitik in Bereichen, die sich außerhalb der demokratischen politischen Kontrolle befinden. Die Autoren beschäftigen sich außerdem mit der Schwerpunktlegung der OMK auf die Entwicklung von gemeinsamen Rahmenbedingungen zur Qualitätssicherung innerhalb Europas. Diese Rahmenbedingungen legen das Hauptaugenmerk auf Kompetenzen zur Laufbahngestaltung und zwar durch die Entwicklung von Qualitätssicherungsansätzen und die Einführung einer nationalen Koordinierung der Bildungs- und Berufsberatung. Die Strategien und Praktiken lassen sich zum Zweck der Annäherung jedoch nicht einfach über Ländergrenzen hinweg austauschen, da es sich um unterschiedliche Strukturen, Richtlinien, Ressourcen und Kulturen handelt. Es gibt viel voneinander zu lernen und viele Barrieren müssen abgebaut werden. In der Praxis steht das European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) als treibende Kraft hinter der Anwendung der OMK. (Red.)

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